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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5205  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8801  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6373  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4218  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2199  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000041

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SUBJECT: A CONVERSATION WITH BURMA'S SOCIAL WELFARE

MINISTER: CYCLONE RECOVERY AND POLITICS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Larry Dinger for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

1. (C) In an hour and twenty minute meeting with Charge Dinger on Jan. 19, Burma's Minister of Social Welfare, Major General Maung Maung Swe, thanked the USG for post-Cyclone Nargis assistance and laid out a laundry list of continuing needs, mostly to help reconstruct schools, roads, and the Irrawaddy Delta economy. The Charge noted that the Burmese regime's suppression of democracy elements makes assistance difficult. When he urged a political opening, the Minister suggested Westerners simply don't understand Burma's need for a firm hand to maintain unity. The Minister complimented the Tripartite Core Group (TCG). Asked about the regime's plans for elections in 2010, the Minister suggested "free and fair" elections would be part of a transition to democracy. The Charge made clear that, to the U.S., "free and fair" has real meaning. Asked about trafficking in persons, Maung Maung Swe said his Ministry handles only repatriation and re-integration issues, mostly in cases from China and Thailand. We comment that post-cyclone assistance seems to have caused the Minister to understand the value of foreign assistance to Burma. He is well-connected politically and willingly exchanged views, though his perspective reflects the Burma regime's emphasis on "discipline" in any discussion of "democracy." End summary.

2. (U) The Charge met with Burma's Minister of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement Major General Maung Maung Swe on Monday, Jan. 19, at Charge's request. A USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) officer on long-term TDY in Rangoon, Stacey Ballou, and an OFDA Washington officer, Ward Miller, also attended. Since the Minister has had a lead role in post-Cyclone Nargis relief, such issues dominated the discussion.

Post-Nargis needs: a GOB laundry list

3. (U) The Charge began the meeting by briefing on the USG's contribution of some \$70 million in cyclone relief, with \$5 million more in the pipeline. He noted that any post-cyclone assistance beyond that amount would require decisions by the new Obama Administration. The Minister then

talked at length about the GOB's post-cyclone development priorities in the Irrawaddy Delta. He thanked the U.S. for its contributions to date, which he said have helped ensure that people have food, shelter, and medicine. Now, in accordance with the PONREPP report on post-cyclone needs for the next three years, the GOB requests international assistance with:

-- education: build/reconstruct at least 600 schools, with a special need for water and sanitation for school buildings.

-- livelihoods: assist agriculture, fisheries, and the salt industry. Since the Delta is the country's rice bowl, improved food security there could support the rest of Burma plus regional and global requirements. Farmers still use traditional methods. They need upgraded skills and mechanization to increase productivity. Tillers, tractors, fertilizer, and quality seeds are priorities. Fishermen also need improved technology. Electricity is a real constraint, which hampers people's capacity to store and process fish for markets. Salt production is a vital industry that supplies a region broader than Burma. It needs further, unspecified support.

-- transport and communications: the GOB plans to construct five new, high-gauge roads through the Delta. Given the topography, many bridges must be constructed.

-- disaster preparedness: an early-warning system (EWS) and cyclone shelters need to be constructed. The GOB can only afford to build 18 shelters; many more are needed. The

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Minister observed how a U.S. EWS helped save lives during Hurricane Katrina. Burma aspires to build a better capacity to warn people when necessary. (Note: GOB estimates the costs of shelter construction as follows: 300 person shelter--USD 575,000; 500 person shelter--USD 725,000; 1,000 person shelter--USD 994,000. End note.)

U.S. interests and the importance of politics and human rights

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¶4. (SBU) The Charge noted that OFDA has a very specific mandate for early response to disasters. Even USAID, with a broader development mandate, does not engage in major construction projects. The U.S. does have strengths though, including in education, health, micro-finance, and capacity building, which can be tapped for longer-term humanitarian or development goals. However, the Charge noted, Burma's political situation and its human-rights abuses make it difficult for the U.S. and other donors to contribute development aid. The world, including the U.S., notices continuing arrests and long sentences for those engaged in peaceful dissent. The Charge urged the Minister to encourage the regime to open its system, release political prisoners, and engage in genuine dialogue with its political opponents. The Minister suggested that Westerners simply do not understand Burma's history, implying that a firm hand is necessary to keep the diverse nation united and to further economic development.

The TCG: useful mechanism; GOB wants it to eschew "politics"

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¶5. (SBU) The Charge asked the Minister's view of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), a joint GOB, UN, and ASEAN mechanism that has coordinated details of international post-cyclone assistance to the Delta. The Minister said the TCG has been "a model for disaster response" and could usefully continue. The Charge noted the USG agrees with that assessment. The Minister added that for the coming rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, the TCG needs to focus on humanitarian, not political issues, on community development of the people in the Delta, not on politics. The Charge reiterated that, no matter how much the Burmese

government wishes otherwise, suppression of democratic elements and abuses of human rights inevitably factor into international decision-making about assistance, especially when assistance moves beyond immediate "relief of suffering" to long-term development perspectives.

2010 elections: what "free and fair" means  
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¶16. (SBU) When the Charge noted rumors that some Ministers will change from uniforms to suits and run in the regime's 2010 elections and asked if the Minister might be one of them, the response was a genuine, lengthy chuckle. The Minister said he had "no comment" about his own future. He suggested, though, that the 2010 elections are to be a further step in the regime's transition to democracy. The Charge noted the Burmese Foreign Minister's pledge at the UNGA last September that the elections will be "free and fair." To the U.S. and others, "free and fair" means all who wish to compete can do so, including those who are now political prisoners, that they can make their political points without fear of reprisal, that procedures are transparent, and that all respect the results. The Minister responded: "Well in our system prisoners can already vote." The Charge stressed that political prisoners need to be able to be free and to participate without fear, including as candidates, not just vote from inside the prison. The West has standards for "free and fair" elections and would be observing events in Burma closely.

Trafficking in persons  
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¶17. (U) The Charge inquired about GOB efforts to combat the  
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trafficking in persons, an important priority for the U.S., and surely a concern for Burma as well. The Minister said the Social Welfare Ministry only handles repatriation and re-integration issues, especially focusing on returnees from China and Thailand. The Ministry of Home Affairs deals with efforts to combat trafficking itself. Asked what specifically the Social Welfare Ministry does to assist returnees, the Minister spoke in general terms about aiding such people to reintegrate into society.

Comment  
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¶18. (C) Diplomats who have been in Rangoon since before the cyclone say Minister Maung Maung Swe has changed his views of international donors dramatically, having had opportunity post-Nargis to observe how much the outside world can help if welcomed in the country. He clearly aspires for considerable amounts of donor assistance to "reconstruct" the Delta's infrastructure and rebuild its livelihoods. Maung Maung Swe is very well connected politically as a brother-in-law of Vice Senior General Maung Aye. When the conversation turned to politics, he was willing to compare views. However, his suggestion that prisoner voting rights should take care of any concerns about human-rights aspects of the 2010 elections is mind-boggling. The Minister understands English well and most likely speaks it well, too; but in the meeting he spoke in Burmese through an interpreter.  
DINGER